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Indigenous March for Rights

by LADB Staff

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An estimated 35,000 to 70,000 demonstrators marched 100 km to Cali, the capital of the southwestern department of Valle de Cauca, arriving there Sept. 16 in what could be the largest demonstration of indigenous people in Colombian history. Marchers from dozens of ethnicities protested against killings, torture, displacement, and disappearances that have plagued native peoples during the multifaction Colombian civil war. They also stated their opposition to the free-trade agreement (FTA) under negotiation between the US and Colombia.

March on Pan-American Highway lasts 6 days, 100 km The Consejo Regional Indigena del Cauca (CRIC) announced the march in August and organized it under the rubric of "the defense of the right to life and the guarantee of human rights...no more war, no more massacres, no more removals, no more kidnappings and no more assaults." Indigenous leaders said the demonstration sought to protest against "all expressions of violence, plundering, exploitation, and death, come what may."

The march left from Santander de Quilichao and moved toward Cali along the Pan-American Highway. Union leaders, Afro-Colombian people, and other sympathizers joined the native marchers on their six-day trek to Colombia's third-largest city.

The Associated Press reported that most marchers came from the Paez and Guambiana tribes. Seven indigenous communities of the neighboring department of Cauca planned the march. Cauca stretches from the Andes Mountains in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west and is the ancestral home of the well-organized Nasa community. They organized the march as a "minga" an indigenous word for an ancestral practice of communities joining efforts toward a common goal for life and against Colombia's four-decade armed conflict, which pits the government forces and right-wing paramilitaries against leftist guerrillas.

Native communities frequently find themselves in the crossfire as different groups battle for territory. It was not only insurgents and paramilitaries the demonstrators wanted to reach; organizers also had grievances to present to the government.

Guambiana leader Jeremias Tununbala said the Colombian government is the principal violator of the collective rights of the indigenous communities. "With each act of agrarian reform and policies of globalization, the Colombian state is taking our lands," said the representative for the 24,000-person group. "The violation of human rights begins with the state itself, it's not the armed groups," said Tununbala, who believes native land rights, autonomy, and cultural identity are also endangered by the FTA that Colombia is negotiating jointly with Ecuador and Peru to open trade with the US (see NotiSur, 2004-04-02).
The FTA has received opposition from Colombian indigenous peoples because they fear that it will hurt them economically and diminish their sovereignty as Indian nations. The Colombian government claims that native land rights were "not even remotely up for discussion" in FTA talks.

Jesus Ramirez, national director of ethnic groups in the Ministry of the Interior, said indigenous lands "are sacred, they are part of the Constitution and are not an issue in FTA discussions, nor will they be, nor in any manner will the government think of touching them."

President Uribe warned organizers against blockades President Alvaro Uribe and his defense minister warned organizers against blocking the highway and committing violence, even though the organizers had said that they planned neither. "Peaceful protest is totally respectable, but all possible preparations must made so the protest doesn't degenerate into violence," said Uribe.

Speaking to the Consejo Social Indigena in Popayan, the capital of Cauca, Uribe said that the indigenous must avoid terrorist infiltrations, disorder, and blockades. And if there were blockades, "the police and army would have to come to clear them and there could be contusions, there could be injuries."

Cauca Governor Jose Chaux, in a Sept. 8 statement, was even less circumlocutory. "Hell will freeze over before the government allows an interruption of the tranquility and mobility of the Caucanos and Vallecaucanos," he said.

Colombian Defense Minister Jorge Alberto Uribe Echavarria said that blocking the highway "could cause grave damage to the security in the area and the economy of the region," as well as "inconveniences." Uribe Echavarria added, however, that CRIC organizers had assured him that they could guarantee there would be no blockades.

The organizers made good on their guarantees, with press reports stating that the march went off without incident, contrary to the defense minister's warning that "interests distinct from the indigenous communities of Cauca are maneuvering behind this mobilization" or President Uribe's intonations about terrorist infiltrations.

Spanish news service EFE reported that the night before the march began the indigenous people of Alto Naya denounced the presence of at least 100 paramilitary members in the area where the mobilization would begin. "There are about 100 masked men dressed in military clothing and carrying weapons of short and long range," said the news agency. Well to the north of the ultimately nonviolent indigenous march, a blockade by transportation workers led the government to mobilize 20,000 police officers on highways where goods from Pacific and Atlantic ports travel.

**Murders and kidnappings of native leaders persist**

August and September saw a continuation of violations of human rights of indigenous peoples throughout Colombia, including the street assassination of Kankuamo leader Freddy Arias and the kidnapping of five Paez leaders in Cauca. The Aug. 6 murder of Arias brings to 261 the number of...
people from the indigenous group who have been killed in the last two decades, 92 of whom have
died during the two-year-old government of President Uribe.

Arias, who acted as human rights coordinator of the Kankuama Indigenous Organization, was
shot down by unidentified assailants in Valledupar, capital of the northeastern department of
Cesar. The crime was considered an act of revenge after Arias denounced in mid-July during the
Second National Roundtable on Peace and Indigenous Human Rights crimes by the paramilitary
Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) against his people to the mission of the Organization of
American States (OAS).

The OAS mission is accompanying the government's negotiations with armed groups, which started
on June 1 (see NotiSur, 2004-06-04, 2004-08-13). The Second Roundtable said that the talks with the
AUC were not "a peace process but an agreement between allies that have always acted together,"
said indigenous leader Hector Mondragon, adding that Arias "encouraged the decision of the
indigenous groups not to support this process."

The Kankuamos are a symbol of success for the remaining indigenous groups in Colombia since
their culture, which had almost been completely lost, was reborn 20 years ago as a result of the
decision of the group's then young generation, after listening to the call of their elders, to rebuild the
culture. Weeks after the Arias murder, five Paez leaders, including Arquimedes Vitonas, mayor of
Toribio, went missing.

The kidnappings were attributed to the Frente Teofilo Forero of the Fuerzas Armadas
Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). The CRIC and other groups called on the insurgents to
negotiate while simultaneously asking the government not to attempt a military rescue effort. Some
400 indigenous people went on their own "rescue mission" in early September and secured the
release of three of the kidnap victims.

On Sept. 20, a group of more than 400 from Cauca began a new march to Bogota to pressure the
government to release two of their leaders. Two weeks earlier, the government had arrested
Alcibiades Escue and Shirley Albor, administrators of the Asociacion Indigena del Cauca (AIC),
which provides health services to Indian peoples with state funds. Marchers said they would remain
in the capital until President Uribe granted the pair's release.

Gaston Chillier, a senior associate on human rights and public security at the Washington Office on
Latin America (WOLA) says the mid-September march can send a powerful signal to Colombian
society, helping indigenous Colombians overcome racial discrimination and telling society that they
are not invisible. "It seems we have seen everything already, but a peaceful demonstration, people
walking the country to tell the state and the armed groups that they want to live in peace and they
don't want to get involved in conflict is a powerful signal," says Chillier.

-- End --